Take Out the Tests, and Hide the Grades; Add the Spiritual with All Voices Raised! Professor Explications and Students' Opinions of an Unconventional Classroom Milieu

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Introduction

Many articles about teaching and learning in higher education embody the southern expression of "preaching to the choir"—dramatizing negative teaching practices from the "average classroom" in order to convince progressive pedagogues (the very individuals who will be reading our theoretical forays) that their own instructional strategy innovations have merit. This is not such an article. In fact, a primary piece of the conceptual framework that underlies this paper is the argument that changing instructional practices and strategies has not led to substantive innovation in higher education classrooms. In fact, emphasizing changes in instructional strategies as a primary means for innovation is a recipe for maintaining the status quo.

Certainly, I do not denigrate the value of innovative instructional strategies. Writing as a way of knowing (Fulwiler, 1982), during-class discussion (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999), learning communities (Palloff & Pratt, 1999), critical analysis of course concepts (Brookfield, 1987), problem-based learning (Knowlton & Sharp, 2003), classroom assessment techniques (Anderson & Speck, 1998; Angelo & Cross, 2003), and similar instructional strategies that go beyond lecture and testing can be useful. As a means of promoting innovation within higher education classrooms, however, a change of instructional strategies lacks substance. What accounts for the limitations of strategy change as a means toward substantive innovation? First, institutions often advocate strategy change through workshops, book clubs, and other short-lived faculty-development interventions. Without support that extends beyond these interventions, faculty members often become uncomfortable with the strategy and therefore regress toward a "teach as I was taught" framework (Nelson & Knowlton, 2005). Usually, this framework consists of lecture and exam-giving, which are the antithesis of innovation. Second, even when faculty members successfully implement and sustain a strategy within their courses, the strategy does not always penetrate all course components. For example, a professor might implement problem-based learning, yet that professor still will assess students by way of matching, multiple-choice, and true/false exams. In such a case, the implemented strategy is not congruent with the assessment (Anderson & Puckett, 2003). Similarly, a professor might implement innovative collaboration strategies within the classroom, yet that same professor will retain the practice of dominating classroom discourse. In this case, the voice that students find within the collaboration is stifled during class (Brookfield, 1987; Brookfield & Preskill, 1999).

More broadly stated, instructional strategies typically have not led to true innovation in higher education because strategy change often has not been the result of a shift in the professor's epistemological stance—a change in the ways that a professor understands (and embraces) the nature of teaching, learning, and knowing. For example, many professors within higher education still equate learning with memorizing content; therefore, they do not fully value strategies that go beyond memorization. An epistemological shift toward understanding the nature of learning as a complex process that transcends memory would allow professors to more properly value congruent instructional strategies (Anderson, 1998; Bain, 2004; Knowlton, 2003). Furthermore, a shift in epistemology would require a reconsideration of learner needs, even when those needs are beyond the scope of what is commonly accepted in higher education—such as helping students come to understand themselves as unique human beings (Knowlton; 2003; Knowlton & Thomeczek, 2007).

To summarize the argument, substantive change in the classroom is best driven and motivated by a change in a professor's epistemological stance. In its full effect, a change in epistemological stance would lead professors to modify the classroom environment. By beginning with a desire to embrace a new epistemological stance and modify the classroom environment, changes in instructional strategies will emerge organically from the professor's desires for operationalizing that epistemology through environmental change. The typical approach of instructional strategies being handed to professors from on high is turned on its head.

So far, this paper has argued the limitations of changing instructional strategies as a starting point for innovating the higher education classroom. As an alternative, this paper has described a three-phased progression—embracing a new epistemological stance, revising the classroom environment to one that is consistent with that stance, and accepting the instructional strategies that emerge naturally from that classroom environment. In the remainder of this paper, my journey through these phases is described. I emphasize adjustments to the classroom environment that I made as a result of embracing a new epistemology. Within the discussion of the modified environment is a consideration of congruent instructional strategies and practices.

Conceptualizing a New Epistemological Stance

As I began reconsidering my own epistemological beliefs, I read a broad array of academic literature. Some was useful, but accepting that literature as the pinnacle of philosophical ideas about teaching and learning was difficult for me. Even perspectives that were offered under the guise of being based in contemporary and innovative views of higher education struck me as being quite pedestrian. And, in total, the body of literature struck me as homogenous, offering little that led me to ideas that broke my thinking out of its conventional shell.

By happenstance, however, I encountered an epistemological perspective that was personally meaningful to me. Appropriately, I did not find this perspective in the academic literature; instead, this perspective came from noted author and business guru Stephen Covey (2006), in response to a question about the "horizon regarding the personal effectiveness with today's new college grads." Covey says,

> The future and success of today's college grads lies in training them to think strategically, conceptually, and interdependently. The key is to inspire them to find their unique talent and passion. I would encourage them to develop a character of deep substance and integrity so that their security comes from within and they're not afraid of leaving their comfort zone and facing new challenges. I also encourage young people to be humble and open to gaining experience and staying on a high learning curve. Because we have moved to a new knowledge-worker economy that is influenced by the world-class competition of a global, digitized economy, they have to go full-speed to catch up and add value. (p. 56).

Covey's commentary implied answers to the exact epistemological questions that I had been wrestling with, and I recognized immediately that those answers could change my classroom environment in productive, yet unconventional, ways.

Why did Covey's (2006) answer hold personal meaning to me? His decisively non-scholarly, yet direct, language resonated with me. His language created sonorities that I did not hear within scholarly publications. More specifically, his style and substance defined learning in ways that stretched my thinking in new directions; and I felt that his ideas would stretch my students' thinking, too. Certainly, in some ways, Covey's definition of learning could be considered conventional; and it is a definition that fits with ideas that exist in scholarly literature. After all, training students "to think strategically, conceptually, and interdependently" (Covey, 2006, p.56) is indicative of both a liberal arts education and an education for the marketplace (Knowlton, 2003). Nevertheless, to describe learning as students finding "their own unique talent and passion" and developing an internal "character of deep substance and integrity" (p. 56) goes beyond the conventional classroom. Traditional classrooms are shaped around a sense of substance coming externally through a process of content acquisition, not around students searching for inner substance. Covey's description of learning is consistent with some academic literature—transformative personal change (Palloff & Pratt, 1999) and notions of "learning about the self" (Knowlton, 2003, p. 8), for example. Covey's view of learning addresses the central question of "what will all this [education] do to me" (Holmes, 1996, p. 24). Still, the uniqueness of Covey's language liberated my thinking in ways that academic literature previously had not.

In addition, Covey (2006) offers an unorthodox view of the students' (and by extension, the professor's) role in a classroom. These views are not usually overtly addressed within higher education classrooms. Covey, for example, challenges students to demonstrate humility and be "open to gaining experience;" he says that students should not be "afraid" of stepping beyond "their comfort zones" (p. 56). Humility, openness, and fearlessness can occur only when students accept the responsibility of "staying on a high learning curve" and going "full-speed" (p. 56). Perhaps all of these characteristics—humility, openness, and acting at full speed beyond what is comfortable—are characteristics that most professors assume and hope for. For me, however, Covey's articulation of these ideas allowed me to begin to move beyond covert and nebulous states of assuming and hoping; the challenge that I wanted to place in front of my students was now overt and concretely articulated. Furthermore, I came to realize that the idea of students staying on a high learning curve and always going full speed countered my commonly-practiced approach of professor and students interchanging the responsibility of going full-speed. That is, I often would go full speed while delivering content to students, which

sometimes left students in a passive role; and then I would require students to ramp up their learning curve toward the opportunity of going full-speed as they reacted to my deliveries.

As I have suggested, Covey's (2006) statement offers a substantive epistemology that he uniquely articulates. Both the substance and form of his ideas stretched my thinking and caused a shift in my epistemological beliefs. I quickly realized that Covey's vision could not be achieved through changes in instructional strategies. Instead, the classroom environment must be changed. Without doubt, Covey helped me recognize the need to move my classroom beyond students' comfort zones and toward high learning curves in order to maximize the potential for substantive student learning.

Adjustments to the Classroom Environment

Covey's (2006) ideas caused me to shift my epistemology. To embrace that epistemology fully, I would have to make adjustments to my classroom environment. As I contemplated this challenge of making adjustments to my classroom environment, I came to recognize that the task-at-hand was about more than *adjusting*; embracing Covey's views required a complete reinvention. To think in terms of "adjusting the classroom environment" is to think only in academic and analytical ways; such thinking promotes scholarly detachment from tasks and their context. This type of detachment allows students (and professors) to remain within their comfort zones and to avoid the types of personal risk that are necessary for finding inner substance, humility, and openness. To make changes to the classroom environment in ways that would give momentum to Covey's ideas, I couldn't think about the matter as a conventional academic—making changes to routines, assignments, and use of human capital. Instead, I had to aim for the unconventional—dare I say "the surreal." My goal was to reconceptualize the very vibe and ambiance that students experienced within my classroom. The goal was to reinvent the classroom milieu.

Using Covey's (2006) definition as the conceptual framework, I point to four ways that I set aside a traditional classroom environment and embraced an unconventional milieu. Within this discussion, a fine line exists between reinventing the milieu and implementing instructional strategies. Properly understood, this section of the paper illustrates an unconventional milieu that stretches all classroom participants—both students and professor—beyond their comfort zones and toward the apex of a steep learning curve. Changes in instructional strategies were not an end in themselves; but, instead, changes in instructional strategies became a way of stabilizing the milieu that I was trying to create. My intention is to provide a description of how I implemented these changes in an undergraduate educational psychology course; in addition, I provide arguments in support of these four changes to the classroom milieu. Within a discussion of these four, I include students' opinions from end-of-semester evaluations.

Amplifying All Voices

Faculty members often seem progressive in accepting diversity. Provocatively, though, I think that we faculty members often define diversity in very narrow, limited, politically-correct, and intolerant ways. Worse, we often do not recognize our own intolerance. For example, several years ago, I was attending a diversity workshop that was sponsored by my university's Provost's office. During the workshop, one participant stood up and proudly announced her state of enlightenment as one who respects all people from all backgrounds; and then she praised the

workshop as a step toward "setting aside the farm-boy mentality." Coming from at least three generations of farmers, I was incredibly offended by such a statement.

I would argue that both her own implicit prejudice and her lack of recognition of that prejudice will influence her willingness and abilities to hear students' views. By not hearing students, she is oppressing the opportunity for learning-based dialogue. All faculty members have biases (whether they know it or not) and privilege some classroom voices (often their own) over others. The biases lead to a sense of privilege that is extended only to some within the classroom community. Speck (1998a) says that pluralism is inherent to our classrooms regardless of how homogenous a set of students may seem; if Speck is right, then we constantly should be asking ourselves how to enhance and amplify the voices of those who bring perspectives, experiences, and beliefs that are most dramatically different from our own. Without the amplification of those voices, we surely will fall short of Covey's (2006, p. 56) vision for "interdependent thinking" as a means of helping future college graduates become comfortable operating outside their comfort zones.

I try to accomplish this amplification of other voices through creating a classroom milieu that diminishes and demeans my own formal authority as the course professor. Toward this goal, I regularly send students a message about the importance of social learning among them; it is a message that routinely appears in my course syllabi as well as in other course documents: "You have significantly more to learn from each other than you have to learn from me." Similarly, I often have included in my syllabi the statement that "the sooner that I can remove myself—as course professor—from the learning situation, the more substantive that [student] learning will become." Such statements only struck me as unconventional when senior faculty members in my department suggested that I remove those statements from my tenure and promotion dossier. They questioned whether such statements would raise concerns among various committees about my ability as a pedagogical "professor"—one who professes.

To further diminish my own role as formal authority, I send students a message that they should feel obligated to interrupt my lectures with their own contributions. I guide lectures away from "teacher talk" and toward interactive and free-for-all events. During the free-for-all class sessions, I try to adopt a stance of vigorously challenging students' views and raising the best arguments that I can muster against the perspectives that they offer. Along this line, I somewhat forcefully try to push unpopular and counter-intuitive perspectives, but I leave plenty of opportunities for students to push back: "If I sound like an out-of-touch Ivory-tower dinosaur, then please say so! You have a responsibility to make your voice louder than mine." One colleague who observed my classroom recently suggested to me that my manner in the classroom almost "begs for" students to challenge my authority and disrespect my expertise. I think this peer reviewer meant that as a criticism; I viewed it as praise, and I indicated to her that I was delighted that she noticed.

One way that I ensure that the during-class free-for-all events are productive is by formalizing homework assignments that prepare students to reply to my vigorous challenges. Even within the homework, though, I abolish many notions of formality in an effort to amplify students' voices. One formality that I have become quite liberal with is the use of "correctness" in students' writings. It is rare that I include criteria related to formal argument in homework

and other written assignments. Notions of a thesis sentence, APA citations, and the like are usually non-existent. Furthermore, grammar, spelling, and punctuation as criteria in writing assignments are rare. My message to students is clear: "Slang? Sure! Your own culturally-appropriate vernaculars? Absolutely! Profanity? If that helps you!" My agenda is to hear students' ideas in their own authentic language, not to ensure that students articulate ideas with a level of scholarly pompousness that will result in my own gratification. To best allow a student's voice to be heard, I have found that I must set aside my preconceived notions of *how* that voice should sound.

Do my attempts to "hear" students result in students feeling comfortable sharing their views and beliefs? On end-of-semester evaluations, I regularly collect data to determine if students are sharing their actual ideas and beliefs, as opposed to conforming to the ideas that they think would gain my favor. I ask students to respond to the following prompt: "On opinion-based writings, I tended to tell [the course professor] what I thought he wanted to hear, not what I really thought." They respond to this prompt on a five-point Likert scale ranging from a "Strongly Agree" (5) through "Strongly Disagree" (1). See Table 1. While the standard deviations are quite large, I am pleased that across the twenty-five sections of Educational Psychology for which I have data, the number has never reached a standard of "neutral" (3). I view students' willingness to honestly articulate their beliefs as an important step toward learning. Until a classroom milieu fosters students' willingness to share their beliefs, pretense will take precedent over learning.

Semester & Section Number	**Number of Students**	**Average**	**Standard Deviation**
Spring 2003	32	2.25	1
Fall 2003	25	1.80	.91
Spring 2004, Section 1	27	2.22	1.31
Spring 2004, Section 2	30	2.63	1.35
Summer 2004	26	1.69	.79
Fall 2004; Section 1	26	2.42	1.34
Fall 2004; Section 2	24	2.25	1.09
Spring 2005, Section 1	30	2.33	1.27
Spring 2005, Section 2	37	1.92	.85
Summer 2005	26	1.96	1.06
Fall 2005, Section 1	25	2.12	1.33
Fall 2005, Section 2	26	1.96	1.11
Spring 2006, Section 1	24	1.88	1.12
Spring 2006, Section 2	26	1.96	.96
Fall 2006, Section 1	24	2.75	1.42
Fall 2006, Section 2	26	2.56	1.39
Fall 2006, Section 6	15	2.00	1.31
Spring 2007, Section 1	22	2.50	1.34
Spring 2007, Section 2	28	2.46	.88
Spring 2007, Section 5	24	2.75	1.19
Summer 2007, Section 1	28	1.93	1.12

Summer 2007, Section 2	24	2.04	1.08
Fall 2007, Section 1	23	1.91	1.12
Fall 2007, Section 2	22	2.50	1.22
Fall 2007, Section 3	26	2.62	1.27

Table 1. "On opinion-based writings, I tended to tell [the course professor] what I thought he wanted to hear, not what I really thought."

Do my approaches for amplifying student voices result in learning? Table 2 shows a comparison of formal lectures with more open-ended class discussions across twenty-five sections of the course. Students marked these items using an informal "learning report scale." This scale obligates students to mark each item in one of several ways: as not contributing to their learning and being "a waste of [their] time" (1); being "vaguely useful and only contribut[ing] loosely to [their] learning" (2); providing them "with a moderate opportunity to learn" (3); contributing "more than moderately to [their] learning" (4); and being "extremely useful in [their] own thinking and learning" (5). As can be seen from Table 2, the averages for open-ended discussions where all students had the opportunity to participate are higher than the averages for formal lectures. This suggests that, on average, allowing students' voices to be heard within the context of the classroom does contribute to student learning in ways that formal lectures do not. As a result of both my own convictions about the need to amplify student voices and students' opinions about the relative merits of open-ended, free-for-all discussions, I have, as of the Fall of 2009, completely abandoned formal lectures within my educational psychology course.

Semester & Section Number	**Number of Students**	**Formal Lectures**	**Discussions & Participatory Activities**
Spring 2003	32	3.89 (1.01)	4.34 (.78)
Fall 2003	25	3.32 (1.03)	4.36 (.70)
Spring 2004, Section 1	27	3.89 (.89)	4.44 (.70)
Spring 2004, Section 2	30	3.70 (.95)	4.03 (1.00)
Summer 2004	26	4.15 (.78)	4.77 (.65)
Fall 2004; Section 1	26	3.50 (1.01)	4.65 (.68)
Fall 2004; Section 2	24	3.79 (.82)	4.38 (.75)
Spring 2005, Section 1	30	3.73 (1.12)	4.67 (.47)
Spring 2005, Section 2	37	3.70 (.87)	4.27 (.79)
Summer 2005	26	4.15 (.72)	4.58 (.57)
Fall 2005, Section 1	25	4.60 (.58)	4.64 (.64)
Fall 2005, Section 2	26	4.08 (.63)	4.69 (.47)
Spring 2006, Section 1	24	4.17 (.65)	4.42 (.72)
Spring 2006, Section 2	26	3.65 (.75)	4.27 (.72)
Fall 2006, Section 1	24	3.50 (1.06)	3.88 (.99)
Fall 2006, Section 2	26	3.00 (1.10)	3.77 (1.27)
Fall 2006, Section 6	15	4.00 (.85)	4.47 (.64)
Spring 2007, Section 1	22	3.95 (1.13)	4.32 (.99)
Spring 2007, Section 2	28	4.04 (.69)	4.21 (.79)

Spring 2007, Section 5	24	3.78 (.74)	4.21 (.93)
Summer 2007, Section 1	28	3.86 (.71)	4.82 (.39)
Summer 2007, Section 2	24	4.13 (.80)	4.83 (.48)
Fall 2007, Section 1	23	3.73 (1.03)	4.36 (.95)
Fall 2007, Section 2	22	3.91 (.87)	4.45 (.91)
Fall 2007, Section 3	26	3.81 (1.02)	4.31 (.93)

Table 2. Comparison of formal lectures and free-for-all activities

Inclusion of Spirituality within the Curriculum

Covey (2006) notes that students' sense of substance must come from within. Covey also notes the need for students to find their own passions. Finding one's own sense of substance and passions requires a spiritual focus (Holmes, 1996; Knowlton, 2003; Murphy, 2005). If finding one's own substance and passion is inherently spiritual and if finding substance and passions is inherently related to learning, then a conclusion is clear: To not provide room for spiritual rumination within the classroom is to hinder learning.

Such an argument is not one of scholarly sacrilege. After all, historically speaking, many now-secularized institutions of higher education once were steeped in religious foundations (Burtchaell. 1998; Marsden, 1994; Murphy, 2005). More currently, from a religious perspective, "faith" often is defined as "act-oriented meaning making" (Nelson, 1987, p. 334), which is inherently "exploratory" and "perspectival" (Holmes, 1996, p. 59) and based on "raising questions and doubts" through "dialogue" (p. 74). These religious perspectives about learning are strikingly similar to commonly-held secular views of learning. Welch (1993) notes that both the "construction of knowledge" and the "construction of self" are important aspects of a true education. Welch points out that these constructions are, in fact, very analogous to religious conversions (p. 388).

While I personally value these connections to religion, I am not arguing that overtly religious perspectives and modes of inquiry should become part of the classroom milieu. Perhaps spirituality in classrooms "welcomes, but does not require, religious beliefs" (Bento, 2000, p. 653). Still, my point remains unchanged: Allowing room for the spiritual promotes student learning and moves higher education classrooms toward a milieu that is likely to vitalize the types of epistemological shifts that I describe earlier in this paper. Consider, for example, a postmodern view that dominates many higher education classrooms—that knowledge and even truth itself are cognitive or social constructions. How can the social construction of knowledge be discussed in any meaningful way without addressing the spiritual realm, given the prominence of spirituality within many students' lives? Within a postmodern framework, students must ask themselves metaphysical questions about their own epistemological, ontological, and deontological stances. The answers inherently are spiritual and require a type of reflection that transcends the acquisition of content.

More practically, consider the popular practice of service learning. One cannot meaningfully implement service learning without discussions of students' civic duty and responsibility to others (Murphy, 2005). Such discussions have spiritual components. Some literature is beginning to broach the subject of spirituality within secular classrooms (see, for

example, Hoppe & Speck, 2005); but because the notion of student spirituality within classrooms still is, at best, an unconventional notion (Bento, 2000; Burtchaell, 1998; Welch, 1993), practical advice within this literature is quite thin. I have attempted to create space for students' spiritual selves within the classroom milieu; this space is created through curriculum decisions and through the way that I facilitate class sessions. Both the curriculum decisions and facilitation practices work together to create a milieu that activates students' egos. As one of my mentors recently said to me, "True learning begins when we can get inside of students' ego circles." Within that circle, the spiritual realm is found.

How do I operationalize this epistemological shift toward a spiritual classroom milieu? In terms of curriculum, I share with students various perspectives that offer ethereal treatment of student learning. As one example, I do share Covey's (2006) views with students. As another example, I regularly read to students excerpts from the cult classic novel *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (Pirsig, 1981). Throughout that novel, Pirsig offers discussion of "care" and personal investment as a part of the learning process. Similarly, I introduce some of the ideas of Wayne Dyer (2001, 2004), who argues that we all have a creative genius within us, and we can activate that creative genius through our powers of intention. Once I introduce the notion of genius within us, I routinely refer to it both during class and as a part of assignment guidelines, course rubrics, and other handouts. Through these passages as added elements to the curriculum, I attempt to lead students to embrace an ethereal view of themselves as seekers who are not confined by the physical realms of time, place, or classroom activity. I aim to help students come to understand themselves as integrated spiritual beings, where the emotional, psychological, and intellectual all combine as they activate intention to attract knowledge into their lives. I am attempting to involve their ego as part of the course, and this involvement can be found in most course activities.

Do these curriculum additions influence student learning? I have asked students to consider the contributions of Pirsig (1981) and Dyer (2001, 2004) toward their learning. Using the earlier-described "learning report scale," students respond to the following prompt: "[The course professor] reading to the class excerpts from *Zen & the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* and from *The Power of Intention*." Table 3 shows the results over the four sections in which I have used Pirsig and Dyer as classroom readings. As can be seen from that table, one average was over a four, while the others were between a three (providing a "moderate opportunity to learn") and a four (contributing "more than moderately to learning"). The summer section that contained an average higher than a four was a very abbreviated semester—meeting six hours a day for three weeks. Perhaps the higher average for that section can be explained by the fact that the course was condensed and thus references to the content-in-question were more frequent and focused.

Semester & Section Number	Number of Students	Average	Standard Deviation
Summer 2007	24	4.04	.91
Fall 2007, Section 1	22	3.41	1.01
Fall 2007, Section 2	17	3.59	1.12
Fall 2007, Section 3	26	3.62	1.10

Table 3. The educational value of the course professor "reading to the class excerpts from *Zen & the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* and from *The Power of Intention*"

Also, I try to facilitate class sessions in ways that emphasize the potential for spirituality as a part of the classroom milieu. I am coming to discover that requiring students to be alone with their own thoughts can promote learning in a more ethereal and spiritual sense than can collaboration with an instructor or classmates. To this end, in recent years, I sometimes call for moments of silence within lectures and discussions. For example, I regularly ask students a question that can serve as the basis for a discussion; before I allow discussion to begin, though, I insist on thirty seconds of silence to allow students to formulate an answer: "Use this thirty seconds as an opportunity to allow the creative genius within you to emerge." After this period of silence, volunteers can respond.

Similarly, while I have long been an advocate of the notions of "writing to learn"—informal writings designed to help students explore their own thinking and discover what they really believe about content and about themselves as learners—I am just, in the last several years, coming to see these writings as opportunities to emphasize the potential for spirituality as a part of the classroom milieu. Writing-to-learn activities allow students solitarily to discover a more vulnerable, honest, and true self—to find the creative genius within themselves. I constantly reintroduce this notion as I prepare students for the writing task: "We've done lots of talking about this topic over the last forty minutes. I'd now like to do a five-minute writing about your reactions to the discussion as a means of allowing you to be alone and look within."

Admittedly, there is a fine line between facilitation as means of enhancing an unconventional classroom milieu and facilitation as instructional strategy. Brookfield and Preskill (1999), for example, introduce silence within discussions as an instructional strategy. Furthermore, writing-to-learn is a common idea within the literature, and that idea often is propagated as instructional strategy (see, for example, Fulwiler, 1982; Lindemann, 1995; Thomeczek, Knowlton, & Sharp, 2005). I absolutely try to implement both silence and writing to learn in strategically useful ways, but my approach to both silence and writing-to-learn is first meant to be additive to the overall milieu of the classroom. Silence and writing-to-learn are not offered as isolated strategies; they become a part of the norm of the classroom zeitgeist.

Do these facilitation approaches that try to pierce students' ego circles by leaving them to be alone with their thoughts contribute to learning in my classroom? Because my use of silence is a recent innovation to my classroom, I have collected data about its value in only one course section. The item was a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1). The prompt read as follows: "[The course professor] sometimes giving us 30

seconds to think about our answer to a question helped me figure out what I wanted to say." The average was a 4.75 (standard deviation of .44).

More consistently, I have collected data on students' opinions of the educational benefits of writing-to-learn. I do collect data on individual categories of writing-to-learn assignments. An explication of this data is beyond the scope of this paper. Here I report findings on a single item that treats the educational value of writing-to-learn more holistically. The item read as follows: "I experienced 'writing to learn' in this class in that I did have times where I discovered what I was trying to say while I was writing. Writing helped me 'figure stuff out.'" The results on a five-point Likert scale are shown in table 4. The averages do seem to suggest the educational benefits of leaving students to be alone with their thoughts. All of the averages in these five sections were higher than a four, which indicates agreement with the prompt.

Semester & Section Number	**Number of Students**	**Average**	**Standard Deviation**
Summer 2007, section 1	28	4.75	.44
Summer 2007, Section 2	24	4.79	.41
Fall 2007, Section 1	23	4.43	.90
Fall 2007, Section 2	22	4.73	.55
Fall 2007, Section 3	26	4.62	.64

Table 4. "I experienced 'writing to learn' in this class in that I did have times where I discovered what I was trying to say while I was writing. Writing helped me 'figure stuff out.'"

Importantly, it is questionable whether students recognize the spiritual component of my course. Because the innovations that I describe of integrating spiritual components into the classroom are relatively new, only once has it occurred to me to ask students if they recognize a spiritual component within the classroom. In one section of Educational Psychology during the summer of 2007, I asked students to respond on a five-point Likert scale to the following prompt: "I think this course had a 'spiritual' component to it." The responses resulted in an average of 3.29 (with a standard deviation of 1.20), creating a cumulative response that is closer to "neutral" than to "agree."

Continuous and Open-Ended Assessments of Content and Metacognitive Skill

When I discuss the syllabus with students early in the semester, I describe the ways that I will (and will not) assess their learning. As a part of this description, I regularly survey students through an informal show-of-hands survey: "How many of you have ever gotten an 'A' on a test or exam; and as you were sitting there looking at that test once it was returned to you, you found yourself thinking, 'I sure pulled the wool over that professor's eyes, I didn't know any of this content'?" Typically, every hand in the room goes up. I then survey them with a parallel question: "How many of you have ever received back a 'D' or 'F' on a test; but as you were looking at the test, you found yourself thinking, 'But I know this content so well. I could tell the professor everything about it right now'?" Many students answer in the affirmative. Often, I extend this line of questioning even further: "If I gave you the exact same exam today that you

made an 'A' on last semester, would you make an acceptable grade on it?" The answers routinely are negative.

I have implemented these informal polls in my courses over the last five years as a part of the first-day discussion about the syllabus, and the anecdotal results have seemed consistent over time: Tests and exams, my students report, do relatively little to instill meaningful learning or to serve as a report that accurately reflects what they have learned. If evidence suggests that tests and exams do not create and demonstrate meaningful student learning and if the professoriate is committed to student learning, then the professoriate is remiss—if not unethical—to support exam-based classroom assessment systems. Alternatives exist; and in what follows, I offer three points of direction; each of which is consistent with the epistemology inherent to Covey's (2006) perspectives.

First, I have abandoned most notions of positivist assessments where students are obligated to report to me close-ended answers to convergent questions. Assessments in my course are writing intensive and require students to develop their own views of truth—their own thoughts, ideas, understandings, analyses, and judgments. These types of assessments do embrace relativism and subjectivism. Many college students are not accustomed to their own views of truth serving as assessments; as a result, these assessments do contribute to an unconventional milieu. Still, as I discussed in relationship to table 5, students do tend to believe that these writings help them learn. More to the point of assessment, I believe that these writings give me meaningful insights into student learning. Furthermore, I have found that my responses to these student assessments are more robust (and thus more instructive) than would be my responses to a test.

Second, many assessments in my course do not focus on content acquisition; instead, they focus on students' metacognitive awareness. Assessments can promote the types of learning advocated by Covey (2006) only when those assessments are balanced between ones that foster students' learning of content and those that foster students' learning about themselves as learners. For example, in order to best promote learning, how might we define the job of, say, a music appreciation instructor? Would it be to teach the facts and figures of music history—a litany of who wrote what opera or symphony joined with the dates and composers? Or, is the job of that instructor to teach students *how* to learn about music—the learning process that a musicologist, music theorist, or performer engages in to better understand the nature of music? Erring toward requiring students to consider their own learning provides a metacognitive (thinking about thinking) perspective and shifts the classroom environment away from an emphasis only on content acquisition; instead, a milieu is created where students recognize the need to think about themselves, not just about course content. This shift in milieu is consistent with the types of thinking skills that Covey advocates, and it is a shift that I have embraced within my educational psychology course.

Because these assessments promote relative and contradictory views of truth and because these assessments often focus on metacognition rather than content, these first two points alone create an unconventional classroom milieu. But, my third point of direction is that these open-ended assessments of both content and metacognitive thinking are consistently and informally integrated into my courses. Consistency and informality of assessments intensify the

contributions of my assessment system to an unconventional milieu. In fact, assessments in my educational psychology course create a natural feedback loop that constantly cycles as a part of the classroom milieu. This loop occurs both during class and outside of class. At the end of class sessions, I will ask students to complete a one-minute paper that summarizes key points and offers a statement of reaction or suggestions for implications. In other cases, I will ask students to explain the "muddiest point" of that day's class session. Between class sessions I require students to use discussion boards, email, and other asynchronous means to complete assessments in the form of offering original discussion contributions and replies to classmates' contributions. Certainly, all of these are assessments in that they help me make judgments about my students' ideas and progress. Still, these assessments are highly informal and frequent. I have found that integrated assessments—as opposed to assessments that are tacked on to the end of an instructional unit—are more likely to help change the classroom milieu toward one where students have to, in Covey's (2006) words, "go full speed" and stay "on a high learning curve" (p. 56).

This approach to assessment is discussed in the academic literature. Both the one-minute paper and the muddiest-point paper are Classroom Assessment Techniques as described by Angelo and Cross (1993). My approach to using asynchronous communication tools for assessment is a strategy that is quite similar to already-published tactics (see, for example, Knowlton, 2004). The notion of informal assessments that are constantly integrated exists in the academic literature, as well (see, for example, Anderson, 1998; Knowlton & Knowlton, 2001). On one level, then, the approach that I describe may seem conventional. Still, students report that this approach adds a unique "feel" to the course that is quite different from what is commonly found in higher education. In fact, students sometimes do not even recognize that my course has assessments. On end-of-semester evaluation questions about the quality of assessments, students sometimes respond with a "not applicable."

On end-of-semester evaluations, students qualitatively have addressed this different "feel" that occurred as a result of not having large-scale formal assessments: "The no midterm and final was a strong advantage because instead of spitting out facts and only memorizing info for a short period of time, I actually focused on learning for once." Another student expressed a congruent idea by noting that a strength of the course was removing an "emphasis on tests and terms" and emphasizing, instead, a process of "just making [students] actually learn and think." Comments similar to these are common. A routine aspect of these comments is the notion that the lack of tests creates uniqueness—the emphasis was placed on learning "for once" and that the course caused students to "actually" learn.

Do these three points of direction for assessments limit students' learning in my courses? The answer seems to be "no." I collect data on end-of-semester evaluations to determine whether students believe that my assessments *deprive them* of learning opportunities. I ask students to respond to an item that reads as follows: "I would have learned the course material better if there had been a mid-term and/or final exam." Table 5 shows the results across twenty course sections from the fall of 2004 through the fall 2007. As can be seen from that table, only thrice did the averages rise above a standard of "disagree" (2.0). In these cases, it only barely surpassed that standard (average = 2.23). Interestingly, in two of the occasions where the

average was above "disagree," the standard deviations were tied for the highest ones that occurred across the twenty sections.

Semester & Section Number	Number of Students	Average	Standard Deviation
Fall 2004; Section 1	26	1.63	1.04
Fall 2004; Section 2	24	2.23	1.35
Spring 2005, Section 1	30	1.82	1.08
Spring 2005, Section 2	37	1.83	1.11
Summer 2005	26	1.44	.57
Fall 2005, Section 1	25	2.11	1.35
Fall 2005, Section 2	26	1.81	1.23
Spring 2006, Section 1	24	1.73	1.20
Spring 2006, Section 2	26	1.78	.90
Fall 2006, Section 1	24	2.09	1.15
Fall 2006, Section 2	26	1.59	.98
Fall 2006, Section 6	15	1.32	.49
Spring 2007, Section 1	22	1.32	.78
Spring 2007, Section 2	28	1.68	1.09
Spring 2007, Section 5	24	1.58	.88
Summer 2007, Section 1	28	1.61	.83
Summer 2007, Section 2	24	1.33	.56
Fall 2007, Section 1	23	1.39	.50
Fall 2007, Section 2	22	1.73	1.20
Fall 2007, Section 3	26	1.85	.88

Table 5. "I would have learned the course material better if there had been a mid-term and/or final exam."

Some evidence suggests that the approach to assessment that I describe in this paper contributes to student learning. For example, I ask students about the degree to which they have learned about themselves as learners in my course. Table 6 shows results. Across twenty-five sections, the average ranges from a 3.85 (between "neutral" and "agree") to a 4.75 (between "agree" and "strongly agree"). Only in 25% of the course sections shown in table 6 did the average drop below a 4.0, which would indicate "agreeing" with the statement. To some extent, then, the metacognitive assessments seem to promote learning.

Semester & Section Number	Number of Students	Average	Standard Deviation
Spring 2003	32	4.09	.89
Fall 2003	25	3.96	.73
Spring 2004, Section 1	27	4.19	.63
Spring 2004, Section 2	30	3.93	.98
Summer 2004	26	4.54	.51
Fall 2004; Section 1	26	4.00	.78
Fall 2004; Section 2	24	4.08	.70
Spring 2005, Section 1	30	3.87	1.06
Spring 2005, Section 2	37	4.08	.82
Summer 2005	26	4.69	.46
Fall 2005, Section 1	25	4.32	.69
Fall 2005, Section 2	26	4.00	.75
Spring 2006, Section 1	24	3.92	.93
Spring 2006, Section 2	26	4.23	.76
Fall 2006, Section 1	24	4.0	.75
Fall 2006, Section 2	26	3.85	.92
Fall 2006, Section 6	15	4.21	1.19
Spring 2007, Section 1	22	4.18	1.05
Spring 2007, Section 2	28	4.14	.85
Spring 2007, Section 5	24	4.0	1.02
Summer 2007, Section 1	28	4.57	.50
Summer 2007, Section 2	24	4.79	.41
Fall 2007, Section 1	23	4.39	.72
Fall 2007, Section 2	22	4.50	.51
Fall 2007, Section 3	26	4.35	.75

Table 6. "I have learned about myself as a learner in this class."

Along the same lines, I recently began asking students about the degree to which my course has changed the way that they think. Bain (2004) advocates the notion of helping students learn to think within the confines of the discipline. Specifically, I have asked students to respond to an item that gets at the degree to which they have come "to think like an educational psychologist." Such a question is related to the course's metacognitive assessments and addresses Covey's (2006) notion of conceptual, strategic, and interdependent thinking. See table 7. With table 7, it is clear that I have had less success in getting students to think in ways that would be indicative of professionals in the field. Only once has the average risen above a standard of "agree." The other seven sections in which I have collected this data show averages between "neutral" and "agree."

Semester & Section Number	Number of Students	Average	Standard Deviation
Spring 2007, Section 1	22	3.55	1.14
Spring 2007, Section 2	28	3.43	.96
Spring 2007, Section 5	24	3.42	1.14
Summer 2007, Section 1	28	3.89	.63
Summer 2007, Section 2	24	4.24	.72
Fall 2007, Section 1	23	3.83	.72
Fall 2007, Section 2	22	3.82	.73
Fall 2007, Section 3	26	3.54	.86

Table 7. "Because of this class, I tend to 'think like an Educational Psychologist.'"

In spite of the lack of success as shown in table 8, tables 7 and 8 together, show some degree of learning gain. These two tables seem to provide some evidence that the approaches to assessment that I have described result in learning that goes beyond what can be reported on a test.

Removing Traditional Grading Systems from the Classroom

I have determined that traditional letter grades (e.g., A, B, C, D, F) and point systems (e.g., exam #1 is worth 20 points while exam #2 is worth 30), in themselves, undermine learning. I have many anecdotes to support such a statement, but my favorite one was a conversation among a group of students that I overheard in my university's dining facilities during the fall of 2006. A group of students was sitting around a table "studying" for a biology exam. As I eavesdropped on their conversation, however, much of their discussion was not about the content of the exam. Instead, they were discussing the number of points that they needed on the exam to reach the minimum threshold for a "B" in the course. After listening to this conversation for a few minutes, I wondered how long the discussion of exam points and letter grades would take precedent over the discussion of Biology content. I started my stop watch. Twenty-five minutes later, those students were still discussing point values and indeed had completed calculations in long hand. From the conversation, I infer that their calculations included already-completed points and an unknown variable of exam points. I wondered the obvious: What if these students had invested that time toward studying Biology? Would their learning have been more substantive?

I have been involved in similar anecdotes, such as students asking me how many points they need to earn on a project to get a "B" in the class. I am astounded, humiliated, and embarrassed at the number of times over my twenty-year teaching career that I have been complicit in perpetuating the emphasis on letter grades and points at the expense of student learning. At one time, I would sit in my office with students teaching them how to calculate their grade. On more than one occasion, I even distributed step-by-step instructions that taught students how to calculate their grade. It is behavior of mine that I now find wrong-headed and obnoxious, if not educationally reprehensible.

These experiences combined with Covey's (2006) view of staying on a high learning curve led me to a pivotal moment in shifting my epistemology and having the desire to create a more meaningful classroom experience: If the goal is to promote student learning, then

traditional grading approaches (both letter grades and quantitative measurements) should be removed from classroom discourse and practices. In terms of discourse, I no longer discuss with students "what it takes to get an 'A.'" Rather, feedback and dialogue are geared toward the goal of helping students improve their own learning. In terms of practices, I have avoided using traditional grades on some types of assignments for many years. As of the summer of 2007, my undergraduate students no longer receive a traditional grade or points on *any* assignment. They do see markings of various types that I draw on their work as a summary indication of my perceptions of quality: smiley faces and frowns or check marks, plus signs, and minuses. Students routinely report to me that they impose a more familiar grade upon these markings—a plus sign surely means an "A" while a "check" equals a "B." I go to great lengths to point out to them that they are making assumptions, and their efforts would be better placed on thinking about the course content, their own learning, and the qualitative feedback that they receive on assignments.

In appendix A of this paper, I have included excerpts from my now-standard handout on grading that I include in my educational psychology syllabus. Perhaps it could serve as a starting point for other faculty members who agree with my argument that removing measurements and traditional grades from the classroom environment rightly will place a stronger emphasis on student learning and create a classroom milieu where process is valued over a graded product. Both students and faculty members have suggested to me that the approach that I outline within this paper and within Appendix A is unethical. On the contrary, I argue that using traditional grades and points may well erode academic ethics; removing letter grades and points, however, can restore a level of ethics by emphasizing learning over administrative book keeping.

I routinely collect data about my students' attitudes on this issue of grading. Table 8 shows my educational psychology students' opinions on two five-point Likert-Scale items. The question represented in the third column ("grade over learning") was phrased as follows: "When it comes right down to it, I am more interested in my grade than I am in learning." The question represented in the fourth column ("Actual Grades") was phrased this way: "I would have learned the course material better if [the course professor] had put actual grades on [assignments]." These items reflect students' opinions about the role of grades in relation to their learning. In considering both of these questions, only once did the averages rise to a standard of being "neutral" on the item. These results seem to suggest that students are more interested in learning than a grade. Furthermore, it seems that students feel that, on average, my removal of points and traditional grades does not negatively influence student learning.

		Question Averages (Standard Deviations)	
Semester & Section Number	**Number of Students**	**Grade Over Learning**	**Actual Grades**
Fall 2006, Section 1	24	2.5 (1.1)	2.8 (1.43)
Fall 2006, Section 2	26	3.0 (1.28)	2.6 (1.24)
Fall 2006, Section 6	15	1.9 (.59)	2.3 (1.18)
Spring 2007, Section 1	22	2.45 (1.06)	2.41 (1.01)
Spring 2007, Section 2	28	2.46 (1.00)	2.25 (1.00)
Spring 2007, Section 5	24	2.54 (1.14)	2.33 (1.13)

Summer 2007, Section 1	28	2.43 (.84)	1.86 (.71)
Summer 2007, Section 2	24	2.30 (.76)	1.54 (.59)
Fall 2007, Section 1	23	1.74 (.81)	2.09 (.90)
Fall 2007, Section 2	22	2.73 (1.08)	2.55 (1.14)
Fall 2007, Section 3	26	2.46 (1.10)	2.54 (1.30)

Table 8. Students' Opinions about Removing Grades from the Classroom.

Recently, as a part of a peer review process, I extracted from my end-of-semester evaluations all open-ended comments that dealt with my approach to grading practices. These extractions came from two sections of Educational Psychology that I taught during the fall of 2008. A full analysis of these comments is beyond the scope of this paper. Still, an overview can provide some important insight into students' reactions to the grading approach that I have described. Out of two sections of the course, twenty-four comments on end-of-semester evaluations used the word "grade," or some variation thereof. Out of these twenty-four comments, four comments had a negative view of my approach. One student noted that there was "a lot of work" inherent to "'trying to figure out' the grading system." Another thought that there should be "a little more focus on grades because it's hard to tell between a minus, check, and plus."

Twenty of these twenty-four comments, however, were much more positive. Importantly, many of the students who offered positive comments did suggest that they would *like* to know their grades on various assignments, but I think that we must distinguish between what students prefer and what fosters their learning. Thirteen responses about grades were offered under an open-ended question that asked about the "strengths" and "advantages" of the course. One student noted that "[l]eaving off the grades gives students less stress and allows them to concentrate on learning." Another student noted that the course was designed to provide "freedom to find [students' own] answers instead of being pressured to find the 'correct' answer for a grade." A third comment also encapsulated the general theme that emerged through most of the comments: "I love the fact the 'grades' were not the main concern, but learning was the goal. I have always thought this, and it was refreshing to see a college professor take this approach."

Implications

In this paper, I have shared my journey through a three-phase progression. This progression began with solidifying an epistemological shift in thinking based on the ideas of Covey (2006). That epistemological shift and discussion of Covey served as a theoretical framework for the remaining two phases of the progression. I noted that making Covey's ideas fully operational could not be achieved by simply changing the classroom environment in a scholarly and academic way; instead, the epistemological shift that I inferred from Covey's ideas could only be set in motion through a more ethereal change in classroom milieu. To this end, I described four changes to the classroom milieu that I implemented in an educational psychology course. Implications for research and teaching are vast. The following discussion addresses a few of these implications.

The first implication can best be stated as a series of rhetorical questions for faculty members: Is there congruence between your own epistemology and the environment of your

classroom? Do your instructional strategies align with the intentions of the environment? In total, do your epistemology, environment, and strategies result in student learning? If the answer to any of these questions is "no," then faculty members must make adjustments to their classroom environment—if not reinvent the entire milieu. Certainly, such adjustments or reinventions may not make professors popular with students. In fact, Speck (1998a) notes that when professors focus solidly on student learning "they will probably confuse students, even anger them, because the teachers will cease to dish out right answers to canned questions [,…and these professors] set themselves in opposition to much that…authority figures will say about the role of the teacher" (p. 36). Perhaps this paper can serve as guidance to help make the adjustments and reinventions less contentious.

Certainly, faculty members who follow the three-phased progression described in this paper will be creating opportunities for additional scholarship about teaching and learning within higher education classrooms. For example, for ease of explication, this paper describes the three phases as a linear progression. It is not linear, and additional careful accounts are needed about the ways that professors embrace new epistemologies and translate those epistemological beliefs into practice. Such accounts might emphasize the curvilinear and iterative nature of negotiating these phases.

The primary purpose of this article was not empirical analysis; still, I supplemented my explanations and arguments in favor of reinventing my classroom milieu with data from end-of-semester evaluations. While not empirically robust, this data is consistent with research on student evaluations to the extent that the research suggests that students are not particularly proficient in judging the value of professor behaviors; students are quite good, however, in examining and evaluating their own learning (Kaplan, Mets, & Cook, 2000; Seldin, 1999). Perhaps the types of evaluation questions that are reported within this paper can guide other faculty members who are interested in collecting data about student learning and attitudes toward various classroom interventions.

More broadly, the use of evaluations as described in this paper is related to faculty governance over tenure and promotion criteria for teaching. If administrators insist on having end-of-semester student evaluations (and they will), then faculty members should ensure that the questions focus on student learning, not on ancillary issues. I reject the view that asking students to rate a faculty-member's likeability is related to student learning. I find it simply laughable that we should ask students to compare a faculty member to others that they have had. To ask such questions is a clear indicator that one has not considered the literature on student evaluations and their legitimate use as a feedback tool for individual faculty members.

The implications discussed so far are relatively concrete and practical. This paper does have implications that are more conceptual and abstract. For example, perhaps one implication of this paper might be related to the potential (and limitations) of the language that we use within our own pedagogical conceptualizations. As I noted, one reason that Covey (2006) appealed to me is because of his non-scholarly use of language—"inspire them," "unique talent and passion," "security…from within," and "not afraid of leaving their comfort zone." This language appealed to me and opened my thinking and analysis of classrooms in ways that traditional academic literature did not. Similarly, consider the argument from this paper about the connotations of the

word "milieu" as indicative of changing the "ambiance" and "vibe" of a classroom. All three of these words are not commonly found within pedagogical literature; and, in fact, more than one colleague has suggested to me that my use of these words within an earlier draft of this article was "awkward," "uncomfortable," and "seem[ed] out of place within scholarly discourse." Yet, reconsidering a classroom using these non-scholarly terms offered me a dimension of understanding my own epistemology and intentions that more traditional language—"classroom environment" or "classroom procedures"—seemed to limit.

As a final example, consider the point about "grading" in this paper. In a non-scholarly sense, the word "grading" might imply any form of judgment regarding student work; thus, my use of any marking—even a smiley face drawn at the end of a particularly interesting paragraph—is a type of "grade." But, perhaps as pedagogues, we should be more discerning in our understanding of various terminology. Indeed, "[i]nstructors sometimes view evaluating, grading, marking, providing feedback, assessing, and commenting as synonymous processes, but each term comes with value-laden assumptions, biases, and connotations" (Knowlton & Knowlton, 2003). As an illustration of the value-laden assumptions within language, Speck (1998b) notes that grading is a monolithic concept: "[G]rading includes, but is not limited to, the professor's subjective professional judgment of students' efforts" (p. 18-19). By shifting our language away from grading, professors do more than adjust syntax. Those professors are making changes that support a classroom environment that is more conducive to learning.

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Appendix A
Grading in Educational Psychology

In a perfect world, we wouldn't have to worry about grades; we could just all assume that we'd each do our best work and aim for the goal of "learning" (which is very different from aiming for a goal of a high grade). It's not a perfect world, and part of my professional responsibility is to give you a grade at the end of the semester. So, how will we deal with grades in this class?

I've always been intrigued by a story of a college professor. The college professor's name was Phaedrus, and his story is told in a cult classic novel called *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (Bantam Books, 1981). Part of the story has to do with Phaedrus' approach to grading.

> "All (semester) long papers would go back to the students with comments but no grades, although the grades were entered into a book" (p. 177).

This is the approach that I will take in this class. If I do my job well, you will never see a traditional grade on an assignment until you log on to CougarNet at semester's end.

Why in the world would I take such an approach? Well, let's look at why Phaedrus took this approach:

> "Grades [according to Phaedrus] really cover up a failure to teach. A bad instructor can go through an entire quarter leaving absolutely nothing memorable in the minds of his class, curve out the scores on an irrelevant test, and leave the impression that some have learned and some have not. But if the grades are removed, the class is forced to wonder each day what it's *really* learning. The questions, What's being taught? What's the goal? How do the lectures and assignments accomplish the goal? become ominous. The removal of grades exposes a huge and frightening vacuum" (p. 179).

I think that being sucked into this vacuum is a good thing, and it can help us think differently about what we are doing throughout the semester. (It also can help us think about issues surrounding grading in k-12 classrooms, as well.) There was another reason that Phaedrus removed grades from his classroom:

> "He had wanted his students to become creative by deciding for themselves what was good [thinking] instead of asking him all the time. The real purpose of withholding grades was to force them to look within themselves, the only place they would ever get a real right answer" (p. 179-180).

Maybe some of you are thinking that this approach "sounds scary." Do you think that Phaedrus' students handled it well?

> "[Most students] probably figured they were stuck with some idealist who thought removal of grades would make them happier and thus work harder. . . . One student laid

> it wide open when she said with complete candor, 'Of course you can't eliminate [grades]. After all, that's what we're here for'" (p. 174).

Is she right? Is that what you're here for—a grade? Are you really here for a little marking on a piece of paper that is shaped like the top of a pyramid with a line drawn perpendicularly across it? I hope that that's *not* why you are here.

I hope you are here to learn, and learning is what I hope that your final grade will reflect. Admittedly, it is hard (maybe even impossible) for a grade to reflect "learning." After all, I can't climb into your brain and see how your knowledge and thoughts have changed. Your course grade will represent my professional judgments of the degree to which you have "shown" your learning.

Let me offer a few general comments for maximizing, monitoring, and understanding your grade:

- The "default" grade in this course is a "B." I assume that you will do "good work." The grade of an "A" is reserved for those rare individuals who do exceptional work and go above and beyond to communicate their preparation and show their dedication to this course.

- While feedback and various markings that you receive on your work (like + and √) are not perfectly correlated with a grade, they do give you indication about the quality of your work, and thus an appropriate grade. Therefore, you should consider that at the point of your third minus, the markings are starting to have some negative impact on your grade. (By about your fifth minus in a category of assignments, that negative impact on your grade is growing strong.) If after your third minus, you don't make an appointment to talk with me about the quality of your work, I can only assume that (a) you understand why your grade might be lowered based on the quality of your work and (b) you accept the judgments of your work as fair and accurate. Therefore, I'm guilt free when I give you a lower grade.